

A 'Real' World War II Death Camp: Oak Ridge, USA

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The industrial complex erected by the German government on a Polish army base at Auschwitz (now Oświęcim, Poland) has long been labelled a “death camp” on the strength of the great numbers of people forcibly sent there as part of extensive ethnic-cleansing programs and as laborers as World War II threatened the German homeland. Aside from death, it produced a wide range of chemical products, synthetic rubber chief among these. Its location was dictated by several factors, including good rail connections, access to the energy (coal) resources of Silesia, and its location outside Germany proper, making it a suitable destination for hundreds of thousands of deportees the German government wished to keep out of the “Reich.”

At about the same time, the US government created Oak Ridge in the mountains of Tennessee, strategically located near hydroelectric power stations fortuitously erected by the government there in the 1930s. Energy—electrical energy, in fact—was as crucial to Oak Ridge as thermal energy was to Auschwitz, since the only product of this huge installation, not known until World War II was over, was enriched uranium to provide the stupendous force used to devastate Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, and to threaten the world in all the time since with the limitless destructive power thereafter at the disposal of the US government.

Oak Ridge, nestled in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Tennessee, was on the side that won—in a vast country, in fact, no inch of which was even attacked, much less invaded by its enemies during World War II. Accordingly, Oak Ridge, America’s “Secret City,” has continued to produce its deadly nuclear materials, today poised atop missiles or in bombs ready for loading into bombers to produce something that acquired a name only after the first Oak Ridge bomb exploded: megadeaths.



A billboard encouraging secrecy amongst Oak Ridge workers

By James E. Westcott [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Auschwitz, on the other hand, was put out of business by the Red Army in January 1945 and was occupied by that force until 1989, only after which it became the center of a booming tourist trade for people eager to visit the site of so much suffering and (German) evil that caused it all. In fairness, the tourist appeal of Oak Ridge today should be augmented by the combined tourist appeals of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (so far) as the loci of the suffering and deaths produced in the verdant mountains of eastern Tennessee.

At Auschwitz, some say, the place was at least partially designed and built to bring about death for millions of the hapless souls ingathered from the vast territories occupied by Germany during World War II and transported there. Thousands of “free” employees, including Germans, were assigned to work there (by no means just guards, but engineers, managers, clerks, etc.), including over 8,000 SS guards.^[1] The loudest claims of the death toll there have declined from over four million to around 1.4 million,^[2] meaning that most of those sent there must have “survived” the camp, having been released, transferred to other camps or just gone home when their tour was up. While the products of Auschwitz undoubtedly helped the Wehrmacht resist the onslaught of hostile armies invading Germany from three directions, it did produce many deaths on its premises, from disease, starvation, exposure, accidents, and a miniscule number of executions as Germany’s ability to defend and even feed its own people was eviscerated by the invaders.

Auschwitz had crematoria, and typhus epidemics that made them necessary, while Oak Ridge seems to have had neither of these if only because its “sponsors” retained political power in the aftermath of the war. There are, as usual, many reasons for this difference. Oak Ridge had its pick of a motivated, and mobilized, population of over 100 million, while Auschwitz was literally a dumping ground for millions of “undesirables” expelled from the places where they had been living—it had no choice as to the ages, education levels, ethnicities, or even freedom from disease of its inductees. The famous “selections” that were performed at Auschwitz after inmates had arrived, were made *before* anyone even got on the trains going to Oak Ridge.

Fatalities at Oak Ridge, where the admittees were overwhelmingly young and fit, could easily be interred in the elevated, well-drained landscape surrounding the installation in the few cases where the bodies weren’t shipped back where they had come from. At Auschwitz, located in low-lying terrain from which the water supply was drawn, the imperative to cremate the numerous victims of disease was absolute. Capacity to ship the thousands of diseased corpses was also obviously lacking, along with destinations where they might be received. The crematoria at Auschwitz were fully occupied disposing of corpses in a manner that protected the living.

Most of the deaths made at Oak Ridge remain as yet unrealized, though its products today no doubt embrace the potential of killing literally billions of people all over the globe, and they are elaborately packaged for mounting in vehicles that can reach any and every place where a human being of any age, sex, race, or religion draws breath. But even if few deaths have been registered in Oak Ridge, and no allegation of extermination programs (of persons in the camps) has even been voiced, still the place abundantly practiced the interracial oppression that has come since 1945 to be the heinous stain of the camp in Poland.



This aerial photograph depicts K-25 and the surrounding area. K-25 was one of the uranium enrichment facilities at Oak Ridge that produced uranium for the Manhattan Project. K-25 was horseshoe shaped and covered an area of 44-acres. In the upper part of the photograph can be seen "Happy Valley," which was the residential area where construction workers and plant laborers lived.

By Manhattan Project (National Archives) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Germany in the 1930s had no blacks to speak of; even if it had had some, they might not have encompassed among them large numbers of recent, alien immigrants and at the same time, a small, conspicuous plutocracy of highly successful merchants and professionals on whose example to evoke the green-eyed monster of envy among the downtrodden masses. To say that Jews were the blacks of wartime Germany, and blacks the Jews of wartime America is a simile subject to many exceptions and differences; yet, particulars of the ways the two groups were treated in their separate wartime environments display striking similarities, especially if differences between the wartime events in the environments themselves (Germany and America) are factored in.

Both installations were essentially industrial. Its peak population appears to have been about 75,000, while the peak population of Auschwitz seems to have been about 150,000 counting the companion installation at Birkenau but not counting the numerous "free" workers who also worked there.

Housing at both installations was hopelessly inadequate throughout the war. That the Germans may have met the “demand” for housing better than the Americans may be ascribed to the lower standards deemed adequate for slave laborers at Auschwitz vis-à-vis those for “free” Americans. On the other hand, the climate at Oak Ridge is a good deal milder than in Silesia, so any given level of housing would be better in Tennessee than at Auschwitz.

Housing, in any case, varied quite as much at Oak Ridge as it did at Auschwitz, with disfavored racial groups (Jews in Auschwitz, blacks in Oak Ridge) occupying the lower strata of the available range. Most blacks at Oak Ridge, in fact, were kept in gender-separated barracks, much as Jews were at Auschwitz, no matter if they were married to each other, and absolutely no matter if they had children—blacks were not allowed to bring children to Oak Ridge, while whites, of course, were. Some fortunate blacks managed to gain the blessings of cohabitation by acquiring access to structures known as “hutments” on the grounds. This form of housing was provided only for blacks; whites enjoyed consistently superior alternatives. The remains of similar dwellings at Auschwitz today are limited to the brick fireplaces and chimneys arrayed across a field at Birkenau (nothing whatsoever remains of the hutments in Tennessee). The hutments had no brick components at all; then again, winters there were shorter and milder, so that such amenities were required only in the equivalent structures provided for whites.

Tales of heinous medical experiments conducted on the conscripts at Auschwitz by sadistic Nazi doctors are almost as numerous as are the multitudes still clamoring among us for the special considerations we reserve for the victims of Nazi cruelty. Dr. Mengele, it would seem, was everywhere any victim could be found, at countless places, and at the same times. Regardless of the liberties German researchers may have taken with people whose lives they considered at least as expendable as those of their sons then fighting on the fronts surrounding Germany, American doctors similarly took liberties with persons at Oak Ridge whose lives they (being white) might have deemed less valuable (their victims being black) than other choices they might have made. Or maybe they, like their German opposite numbers, merely chose people less able to draw attention to their objections, or even to object.

The case of Ebb Cade, a black 53-year-old construction worker at Oak Ridge, is illustrative. Cade was hospitalized after an auto accident in which he suffered some general trauma and a fractured leg; he was coherent when he was admitted to the hospital. His treatment there was delayed so that there would be time to observe the effects on him of the (covert) injection of some plutonium into his bloodstream. He was, like Jews at Auschwitz, very much a captive, if only under “medical” auspices. As a captive, he was subject to the detailed observation that such experiments require to yield usable results. After some months, during which his injuries, with or without medical assistance, healed, Cade “liberated” himself and returned, by one means or another, to his home in North Carolina. Experiments of this kind continued, though not necessarily at Oak Ridge, well into the Fifties. Most, if not all, of the subjects were black. None is known to have been Jewish. Whatever experiments were conducted at Auschwitz ceased permanently in early 1945, and those alleged to have been in any way complicit in them have been hounded literally to the ends of the earth throughout all the decades since.

There is an irony to be found in the disposition of the lethal materials produced at Oak Ridge. Of course, those who labored so hard under such lamentable conditions there can take pride in the 200,000 to 400,000 deaths wreaked upon the Japanese, and many no doubt did, and do. But during the time in the early Sixties when Israel was cobbling its own nuclear-killing potential together, there occurred at a depot for warhead material, called NUMEC in Apollo, Pennsylvania, a “disappearance” of over 100

kilograms of the material. NUMEC, headed by one Zalman Shapiro, was known by the CIA to have suspiciously close connections with Israel and its agents in the US carrying out various kinds of industrial and military espionage.[3] The end result of this connection is that the lethal product of Oak Ridge graces—or graced, if some of it has since lost its potency—the warheads of Israeli nuclear bombs and missiles targeted on whatever cities, the devastation of which the Israeli government calculates might best serve its interests.

The hundreds of thousands of deaths undeniably produced at Oak Ridge enjoy not one shred of moral superiority over even the most egregious deaths attributed to Auschwitz. Obviously, Oak Ridge’s victims were civilians, whose innocence can be asserted quite as validly as can the innocence of Auschwitz’s victims. While the US Army Air Force did not choose its victims individually, nor by what ethnic group each appeared to be a member of, it *did* choose its targets, and in doing so made very much the same choices, en masse (Nagasaki, ironically, had long been by far Japan’s most “Catholic” city, even sporting a cathedral). But above all, killing these hundreds of thousands of people was utterly unnecessary to advancing America’s declared aim of overthrowing Japan’s government and occupying its territory. It is today well known[4] that President Truman ordered this mass murder in order to demonstrate to the world that the US had the power to annihilate it. Only after this crime did he deign to accept the Japanese surrender that by that time had lain on the table for months.

The thousands of real holocausts produced at Oak Ridge during and since the war remain at this time consigned to the future.

The last death at Auschwitz occurred in January 1945.[5]

Perhaps it was a Jew’s.

But it *was* the last.

Notes:

- [1] Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum.
Online: http://en.auschwitz.org/h/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=17
- [2] Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum.
Online: http://en.auschwitz.org/h/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=13
- [3] Victor Gilinsky. Letter, “Israel’s Bomb,” in *New York Review of Books*, May 13, 2004.
- [4] See Joseph Bishop. “Atomic War Crimes,” in *Inconvenient History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 2010.
Online: http://inconvenienthistory.com/archive/2010/volume_2/number_1/atomic_war_crimes.php

- [5] Danuta Czech. *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1990), p. 804. Czech writes, "Of the 850 sick prisoners left behind during the deportations, more than 200 prisoners die by January 27."

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